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Quiet Sale of U.S. Gems

By William Cooney

The General Services Administration admitted yesterday it held a quiet little sealed-bid auction in San Francisco April 2 — selling jewelry given public officials by foreign governments.

"The sale of these items is a sensitive matter," said Rich Vawter, director of information for GSA.

"We wanted to hold the sale quietly and as far away from Washington, D.C. as possible and that's why we picked our regional office in San Francisco."

The auction was an experiment, Vawter said, to find ways to dispose of surplus property that has been accumulating since passage in 1966 of the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act.

That law says no American government official or member of his family may keep a gift worth more than $50 given them by any king, prince or foreign state.

More valuable gifts are automatically the property of the United States and the State Department determines if they are displayed in a museum or presidential library or are disposed of.

Such gifts from foreign potentates hit the news in mid-May when it was disclosed that Mrs. Richard Nixon wore some jewelry given her and her daughters

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by the rulers of Saudi Arabia.

Vawter yesterday said GSA "does not contemplate any more such jewelry sales now," but that depends on the State Department.

He said GSA knows the origin of the jewels sold April 2 by sealed-bid auction from a safety deposit box in the Wells Fargo Bank branch at Market street and Grant avenue.

"But it is a matter of diplomacy not to divulge that information," Vawter said.

There was no public announcement of the sale. Notices were mailed by GSA to 3424 persons who previously had asked to be notified routinely when jewelry is being sold by GSA.

Fifty-six persons had the jewelry inspected at the bank. The items offered went to three bidders.

The most expensive, a diamond and ruby necklace and ring set, went for $5612.12 to R. O. Murphy Jr. of Grove City, Pa.

Edward M. Wavers of Yuma, Ariz., paid $8032.80 for five gold watches with diamonds. A company, Michigan Systems Research of Dearborn, Mich., paid $150 for the other item, an amber pendant set including chain, earrings and ring.

"It was a successful sale," Vawter said yesterday. "The items sold for 81 per cent of their appraised value."

Was it successful the other way, he was asked, in keeping it quiet so the country that gave the gift would not be offended by having it sold?

Vawter paused, sighed and said, "All the returns are not in on that yet."